

RIYADH AND TEHRAN, 2006: HONEYMOON ON THE ROCKS

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Despite record oil revenues, 2006 was not a great year for Saudi Arabia. Iran raced towards nuclear arms, while it joined Syria in destabilizing the Saudi-supported government of Lebanon through its proxy ally, Hizballah. Iraq threatened to become a Shiite-dominated state, representing a quantum increase in Iranian regional influence, and Riyadh's main ally, the United States, foundered in its attempts to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq. Saudi religious figures aired their unhappiness over Shiite ascendancy, and there were inklings of dissent within the royal family.

Some history is instructive. The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance of 1744 was by definition anti-Shiite, viewing many Shiite practices as polytheistic. Riyadh has a history of oppressing its own Shiites, which number approximately 10% of the population and are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. The 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution posed a strategic nightmare, as Iran now challenged the Saudis for regional hegemony and stirred unrest among its Shiite subjects. Until the mid-1990s, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca was the site of repeated clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi forces.

Relations reached their nadir in 1996 with the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran by Iranian-backed Saudi Hizballah, killing nineteen US servicemen. But then a

curious thing happened. Profoundly shaken, the Saudis reached a *modus vivendi* with the Iranians: Riyadh would refrain from providing Washington with conclusive and legally-admissible evidence of Iranian complicity in the bombing if Iran would desist from supporting Saudi Shiite dissidents. For ten years after, Saudi-Iranian relations enjoyed what can only be called a honeymoon.

But in 2006, the pendulum swung back. Seen from Riyadh, Iran is rapidly becoming a regional, and even a world power, threatening to surround it with a Shiite crescent of enmity. The failure of the US-led international community to stop Iran's march towards nuclear arms is an existential issue for the Saudis. Although having come to Saudi Arabia's rescue in the past, an America weakened and thinly-stretched by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan hardly appears poised to do so again.

During and after this past summer's war in Lebanon, the Saudis went into diplomatic overdrive. "Independent" Saudi security consultant Nawaf Obaid argued in the American press for a Saudi role in "containing Iran in Lebanon," while King Abdallah visited Turkey (the first visit by a Saudi monarch in forty years) to coordinate a contain-Iran policy. Syria, universally held responsible for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri (a Saudi favorite), was also a target: former

Syrian vice-president and opposition leader Abd al-Halim Khaddam was widely reported to have met with Saudi officials. In October, Saudi Arabia hosted senior Iraqi Sunni and Shiite scholars, who issued the Mecca Charter, prohibiting sectarian killing.

The disintegration of Iraq presents the Saudis with numerous problems. While it had no love for Saddam Husayn, Iraq had provided a crucial bulwark against Iranian regional power. The Saudis initially acceded to a formula which maintained the unity of the state. However, as it became increasingly clear that matters were going awry, it reverted to supporting Iraq's Sunni minority through infusions of cash and turned a blind eye as individual Saudis joined the Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

Saudi Arabia does not support a US troop withdrawal from Iraq. The former ambassador to the US, Turki Al Faysal, warned in March 2006 that "it would be a tragedy and a catastrophe if [US troops] were to leave uninvited." Following the Democratic victory in the US midterm elections and in an attempt to influence the outcome of the Iraq Study Group (the "Baker-Hamilton" report), Obaid publicly threatened "massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis." Public saber-rattling is not a Saudi trait: Obaid's *Washington Post* op-ed was officially disavowed and he was sacked a few days later, probably because of his bluntness regarding sectarian matters. "We have never accentuated one sector over another or one ethnicity over another," said Turki blithely.

In mid-November, Turki himself abruptly resigned his post. Former ambassador to the US, Bandar bin Sultan, secretly visited Washington (he had apparently been doing so nearly every month during the past year, without informing Turki), and Vice President Richard Cheney flew to Saudi Arabia for further talks. During the latter visit, Cheney was reportedly told that the Saudis might provide financial backing to Iraqi Sunnis. Turki's resignation may have either been connected to differences over Iran policy (with

the ambassador preferring engagement to confrontation), or to a conflict over the post of foreign minister, which both Bandar and Turki appear to covet, or to a combination of both. More generally, this jockeying for position is probably part of a larger trend among leading members of the royal family in preparation for the eventual succession to the throne, given that both the monarch and crown prince are in their 80's.

The influence on Saudi domestic affairs of Shiite regional ascendancy is worrisome to the Saudi leadership. This was part of the reason for the explicit and official condemnation of Hizballah's "rash adventures" during the summer. Opposition and establishment Wahhabi ulama were divided on their attitude towards the Shiite ascendancy. While some supported Hizballah's "resistance," even if they were Shiite, others sounded the alarm, intoning the traditional Wahhabi abhorrence of their "polytheistic" practices, termed Hizballah (the "party of God") Hizb al-Shaytan (the "party of the devil"), and warned about Sunnis converting to Shiism. Meanwhile, demonstrations in favor of Hizballah by Saudi Shiites highlighted even further the possible destabilizing effects of Shiite regional ascendancy.

As Saddam Husayn's executioners tightened the noose, they called out support for Shiite leaders.

The Saudi response to the execution was to protest its having been carried out on the Id al-Adha holiday. The official press agency expressed "surprise and disapproval," and took an explicit swipe at Iraq's Shiite leaders and an implicit one at Iran, stressing that "leaders of Islamic countries should show respect for this blessed occasion and not demean it."

All these developments make for a very uncomfortable environment for the Saudis. With Iran to its east, a Shiite-dominated and Iranian-influenced Iraq to its north, and domestic Wahhabi anger at the Shiite ascendancy, the Saudi royal family is not likely to sleep any better in 2007 than it did in 2006.